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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001519

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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SILENCED WRITER RETURNS AFTER NEWSPAPER COLUMN STRIKE, SEMINAR IN DEFENSE OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Reftel: Kuwait 1192

1. SUMMARY: Liberal columnist Ahmed Al-Baghdadi, who forswore writing after being sentenced to a one-year suspended jail term for defaming Islam, has returned to work, saying that he must write to defend himself. His return follows an April 12 newspaper "column strike" in support of freedom of expression and a seminar, held by a prominent non-governmental organization the same night, to discuss press freedom. In the strike, ten liberal editorialists from three of Kuwait's five Arabic dailies submitted blank space instead of their regular columns. During the seminar, Kuwait's leading liberal thinkers and activists called for a strong defense of freedom and criticized executive overreach, legislative interference, and the religious "hidden government." END SUMMARY.

"I Am Here To Stay"

2. Returning to his regular Saturday column in pro-government Arabic daily Al-Seyassah on April 16, liberal columnist Ahmed Al-Baghdadi wrote, "I am here to stay, and the tyrant's life is short." This is a change for Al-Baghdadi, who said that he would discontinue writing after an appeals court found him guilty in early April of "defaming Islam." The court sentenced Al-Baghdadi to a year in jail -- which he suspended by paying a \$6,000 fine -- and three years probation. Following the court decision, Al-Baghdadi wrote, and told emboffs, that he was unwilling to continue writing with the sentence hanging over his head (Reftel).

3. Al-Baghdadi said that misleading reports regarding his silence compelled him to write again. "I want to defend myself. Some people thought I stopped writing out of cowardice," Al-Baghdadi wrote in his April 16 column. "I thought I would stop writing for my safety, but I decided that a free pen should not stop writing." In the remainder of his column, Al-Baghdadi returns to familiar ground. He criticizes religious passages and influences in the Kuwaiti curriculum, the very activity that caused the current judgment against him.

"Freedom in a Blank Space"

4. Al-Baghdadi's return comes shortly after liberal writers, academics, intellectuals and lawyers rallied around his case. On April 12, ten liberal columnists writing for three of Kuwait's five Arabic dailies published empty columns as expressions of support for Al-Baghdadi and freedom of expression. An announcement on the front page of one daily, Al-Qabas, described the strike as "a call to break all the handcuffs that restrain our freedom...the blank space is a lengthy sad article reflecting the miserable situation of the press." The announcement referred to the wide white columns spread across the editorial section of the paper, in which was written, in large type, "For the sake of freedom of expression we stand united," as a call for "freedom in a blank space."

5. Many of Kuwait's most outspoken liberal voices, including many who have also had cases brought against them by Islamists, joined the strike. Ali Al-Baghli, a Shi'a former oil minister and frequent and vocal critic of the Islamist influence on all aspects of Kuwaiti society, told a wire reporter that the strike was "a symbolic gesture to protest the harsh court ruling [against Al-Baghdadi.]"

"We Do Not Have A Free Press."

6. The night of the strike, the Kuwait Graduates' Society, a prominent liberal non-governmental organization, held a seminar to discuss freedom of expression. Many who spoke, among them some of Kuwait's leading lawyers, academics, and editors, cited Al-Baghdadi's case as reason to be concerned about the fate of freedom in Kuwait. Dr. Khalifa Al-Wugayan, a lawyer and poet, said that there was no freedom of the press. Rather, he said, columnists and thinkers are forced to submit their ideas for review, and only the personal stature of leading editors-in-chief and newspaper

owners keeps newspapers from being shut down. He said that the country is controlled by a "hidden religious government."

17. Other speakers were less conspiratorial, if no less passionate. Walid Al-Nesf, the editor-in-chief of Al-Qabas newspaper, said that laws protecting free expression are not enforced by members of parliament, who are unresponsive to many of their constituents. He also confessed that he is frequently subjected to "political pressures" relating to what he chooses to publish. Lawyers among the group, including Emad Al-Seif and Mustapha Al-Sarraf, bemoaned the fact that writers are subject to criminal, not civil, prosecution, and jail time, under the current law.

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